

Grand Slam

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Extract

Rain pummelled my tin roof. It alternated between deafening and nothing, with some pitter-patter between. When it came it roared; a million tennis balls served at 200 kilometres per hour. When it stopped the wind stepped up, raging in great bellowing gusts. Something scraped my bedroom window. I got up, peeked through the gap in the blind.

In the dim light from the street I could see some of my tiny courtyard. The scraping, skinny branches of my pear tree. A tornado of leaves and paper, the clattering front gate, dark corners. Beyond the walled garden, the sky was blacker than the night itself. Lightning approached, its thunder trailing behind.

I tugged at the blind, pulling it to the side to try to cover the gap, as I'd done a million times before, also without success. I needed a new blind. I got back into bed.

At the back of my half-demolished house, I could hear Steve's tarps fighting for freedom. They snapped, up and down, a loud clapping sound. The back door rattled.

It was a warm night, but I snuggled under the doona. Put it over my head. Tried to think positively, like how lucky I was to have a roof that would probably stay put, unlike the poor buggers in Western Australia, not knowing which direction the prowling Cat 5 cyclone would take on a whim, its eye on defenceless roofs and our oil rigs.

Axle was suddenly alert next to me; I felt his body tense. I snatched the doona away from my face and in the increasing flashes of lightning, I watched him watching the window. He sat up, his long, black tail twitching. I turned my head and together we stared at the pear tree's madly waving limbs, at its eerie strobing image through the thin blind.

I sat up too. Axle lowered into a crouch, paws tucked under, tail still twitching. Now he stared at my bedroom door.

'Bloody hell, Axle. You've slept through worse than this. You've slept through Jack's snoring.'

He didn't respond. I tickled his ear. He stared at the door. Against all usual desires I had about really big mice and where I'd like them all to go, I hoped that's what had his attention. But then I heard a sporadic thump, thump, thumping sound. I, too, stared at the bedroom door, holding my breath for a full minute.

I shook my head. 'This isn't helping.' I turned on my bedside lamp, threw off the doona and got up, scanning the floor, knowing but still not believing that big mice couldn't fit under the bedroom door. I pulled on my dressing gown, changed my mind and donned a raincoat and runners. I held the door knob, took a breath, yanked open the door. Nothing there but my passageway full of boxes and crap. Directly to my left was the front door. I checked all three locks. Down the passage, next to my bedroom, was the spare room, then the bathroom, and that's where my house ended. Where Steve had temporarily placed the old back door. The cat

flap blew in, horizontal. It dropped, blew up again. Too small for someone to crawl through. Too small for a big bad man, anyway. Not too small for a really big mouse.

I shivered in spite of the heat and my sweating armpits, and tiptoed around the mess, arms out for balance. I stepped over a box of saucepans, stopped, picked up a small but heavy one. At the door, on my knees, I stared through the cat flap. No-one there. Hold on, wasn't I supposed to have a security guard? Didn't Jack say he'd put one there every night until I moved out?

I unlocked the back door and pushed it open. The wind snatched it off me, slamming it into the old brick wall that separates my house from its twin. Something smacked my face and I dropped the pan, reeling back, palm to my stinging cheek. A rope danced in front of me; one of the tarp's ropes, broken free. I grabbed it with both hands and it yanked me into the backyard, the rain, the mud. A wind gust flipped the hood off my head. The rope tried to shake me off. I looked for an anchor, somewhere to secure it. Above me was an exposed beam, its likely home. Too high for me to reach without a ladder. Too dangerous even if I had one. Should I call Steve? No, because he'd nag me to move out. I let the rope go, arms up to protect myself from its crazed flapping. I pulled the hood back over my head and squelched across the yard to the cyclone-wire fence at the back. I checked the padlocked gates and pressed my face into the fence, peering up and down the narrow street, full of nothing but quivering back fences, sleeping vehicles and torrential floods in the gutters. None of those cars contained a security guard, that I could see. Now I thought I should call Jack, but he'd definitely make me move out if there were noises keeping me awake and his security guy hadn't fronted. I'd rather risk my life than move to my mother's. Well, for a couple more days, anyway.

But what if the security guy had been murdered by bad men? Who were now waiting in the shadows? Waiting for a chance to come and get me. I mustn't think about bad men. I mustn't! It was hard not to, though. Shane McGann was now in jail because of Jack and me. His friends might want payback. That's what bad guys do, don't they? Dish out payback? Avenge their mates in some horrible, throat-cutting, body-dumping fashion? Tyre irons and boots of cars. Bottom of the river and all that?

Goosebumps crawled up my back. There was a movement behind me that I sensed rather than heard. My head snapped around and I stared at the square, dark space between me and the back of my house. Axle stood silhouetted in the open door, ignoring the leaping rope. I strode across the yard and through the door, slamming it behind me, unconcerned about my muddy shoes on the old carpet. I bent to pick up Axle but he hissed at me – hissed! – and streaked up the passage, his body low, to my bedroom. I followed, hesitated at the bedroom door. There was a new noise. I stepped up to the front door and peered through the peephole, waiting for my vision to adjust to the darkness. But I knew without looking that my front gate, which was closed ten minutes ago, was now open, and banging against the wall. Somebody was out there.

I rushed into my bedroom, to the laundry hamper. I hadn't touched my gun since Jack gave it to me over a year ago. Back then I'd pushed it into a sock and dropped it into the hamper and covered it with a pile of clothes. Which were still unwashed because I'm scared to touch the gun. I reached into the hamper, changed my mind. I'd simply freeze if I had to use it. The bad guy would take it off me. I closed my eyes, took a huge, shuddering breath. I simply forgot to lock the gate, that's all. If it had been locked, no-one could have opened it. Unlocked, it was

old and unreliable, like the rest of my house, especially in this weather. I relaxed my shoulders, rolled my head, opened my eyes.

From the end of the bed, Axle growled. It was a low, warning sound I'd never heard come out of him before. As I stared at him in horror, it took me a second to realise that he wasn't staring back at me, but rather past me, at the window, where I now looked, and where a sudden flash of light showed, in sharp outline, a human shape on the other side.